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EARLY DOCUMENTS

RELATING TO

ENGLISH HISTORY.

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ON SOME EARLY DOCUMENTS IN BRITISH HISTORY.

PART I.—RELATING TO ENGLISH HISTORY.

Whoever has given a critical examination of original histories relating to the early English people is struck, not only with the paucity of the documents, but also with their comparative unreliability. The Roman epoch, in British history, presents an intelligent comprehension of the people. The Saxon advent is shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. For nearly five hundred years English history consists of an age of fable, which is only broken by the writings of the venerable Bede, which cast a ray of intelligence across that terrible period.

Modern histories, written for the popular eye, fail to present the slender facts upon which their statements rest. But these works are mere compilations,—one author copying directly the errors of his predecessors, without a careful or unbiased investigation into the authenticity of the documents, which had been previously relied upon. Proceeding no farther back than Henry's "History of Great Britain," published in 1788, it will be seen that no suspicion ever crossed his mind relative to the authenticity of original documents relating to the Saxon period. Even the present generation has witnessed the publication of an English history which, apparently is utterly oblivious to the progress which has been made in the critical analysis of these ancient writings. In Green's "Larger History of the English People," nine sections or paragraphs are devoted to the authorities consulted in compiling the first book, or the period from A. D. 449 to 1071. The first section declares the *Epistola* of Gildas to be a book "of great value in the light it throws on the state of the island at that time, and as giving at its close what is probably the native story of the conquest of Kent. This is the only part of the struggle of which we have any

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record from the side of the conquered. The English conquerors, on the other hand, have left jottings of their conquest of Kent, Sussex, and Wessex in the curious annals which form the opening of the compilation now known as the 'English' or 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,' which are undoubtedly historic, though with a slight mythical intermixture." A fragment of the annals of Northumbria, "which bears the name of Neunuis, alone throws light on the conquest of the North." In section five it is declared that Asser's "Life of Alfred" "is probably really Asser's work, and certainly of contemporary authority," and Ethelwerd's chronicle "adds a little to our knowledge of this time." Section six says Florence of Worcester "is probably the translation of a valuable copy of the 'chronicle' which has disappeared." The various sections also speak approvingly of other writings.

The impression conveyed in this and other modern histories is that these early documents are authorities, and upon them the essentials of early English history rest. It is admitted that the early annals of Britain are necessarily of importance in tracing out history, and their proper study cannot be too highly estimated. How far these early chronicles can be trusted is a question which must be decided on the respective merits of each.

The first and oldest of these books referred to is that of Gildas, claimed to have been written about the year 546, which has been translated and often printed. The best known editions are those of Stevenson in 1834, and Dr. Giles in 1848. It consists mostly of violent invectives not only directed against the continental invaders, but also against his own countrymen. Stevenson, in the preface to his edition of the original Gildas, says; "We are unable to speak with certainty as to his parentage, his country, or even name, the period when he lived, or the works of which he was the author." To this Dr. Giles makes the following observation: "Such a statement is surely sufficient to excuse us at present from saying more on the subject." Gibbon¹ speaks very disparagingly of Gildas, while Dr.

¹ Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Chap. xxxviii. Vol. III., p. 619

Nicholas² has most conclusively shown that no reliability can be placed on his work. A careful study of the book demonstrates that it exhibits but an indistinct acquaintance with the events which took place towards the close of the Roman domination; the author declares (Sec. 4), "I shall not follow the writings and records of my own country, but be guided by the relations of foreign writers;" he contradicts contemporaneous Greek and Roman writers, which is evidenced by his statement relative to the Roman abandonment of the Island from the empire of Maximus and the subsequent erection of the Roman walls (given in paragraphs 13 and 14); Boadocea is called (Sec. 6) "that deceitful lioness," although history has proved she had all the attributes of true nobility and heroism; the Britons who fought under her are called "crafty foxes" who made their backs "shields against their vanquishers, and they presented their necks to their swords, whilst chill terror ran through every limb, and they stretched out their hands to be bound like women;" he never loses an opportunity of heaping epithets and disparagement upon his countrymen, even declaring, (Sec. 19) that they were "more eager to shroud their villainous faces in bushy hair than to cover with decent clothing those parts of the body which required it," &c. &c.; in section seven he gives a picture of Britain as a Roman province which belies history and all probability, notwithstanding the well-known fact that it was a favorite province, the abode of many emperors, a rich mine of wealth, and a field of renown to some of Rome's ablest generals. During the early part of the fifth century the Greek and Roman writers ceased to notice the affairs of Britain. From that period the narrative rests solely on the authority of Gildas, which in later years was adopted by Bede and succeeding writers. These and other considerations can well excuse the indignant words of Nicholas³, "It is time to have done with Gildas. It is clear that, allowing he was a real person, and wrote his history at the time commonly supposed, his statements in all matters pertaining to the Britons, are wholly unworthy of credence. He pursues them

² Pedigree of English People, pp. 252. 258.

with an animosity that is never satiated, and belies all authentic history in branding them with the character of timidity, cowardice, and tame submissiveness when their country was being torn from them by strangers. It is impossible to dignify such a chronicler by the name of historian, and it is utterly impossible to receive his statements as anything else than the splenetic exaggerations of an ill-informed, and prejudiced monk."

Following Gildas is that of Nennius, thirty-three MSS. of which still exist, divided into five classes; first, the Harleian MS. of the tenth century, the text of which formed Stevenson's edition of 1838; the second, the Vatican MS., which was published by Gunn in 1819; the third, later MSS. with marginal additions; the fourth, a class of MSS. in which the marginal additions are incorporated into the text; and fifth, the Irish translations. The date of the original is given by some at A. D. 796, and by others at 994, or a difference of two hundred years. The Vatican MS. gives it at 946; the Harleian at 796; and some of the MSS. of the third class at 879. ³Skene, one of the most laborious of historians, admits the work is not only one of traditions, but also contains interpolations and additions. The Vatican MS. was probably compiled by Mark, the Hermit, who gathered the tracts, written at different periods, by various hands, but connected only by the fact that they relate to some historical event connected with the British Isles. How far these prior tracts are reliable, must largely be left to conjecture. It is also a difficult task to eject the interpolations. There appears to have been an original basis for the work. This may have been the work of a man by the name of Nennius, whose original work terminated with the kingdom of Northumbria in 547.

During the obscure period of English history the name best known is that of Bede, upon whom the epithet of "The Venerable" has been bestowed. Bede was born in 673; at the age of thirty, became a monk, and died in 735. He is best known on account of his "Ecclesiastical History," which he brought to a

³ Ibid, p. 258.

⁴ Chronicles of the Picts and Scots, p. 24.

close in his fifty-ninth year. Numerous editions of this history have been published. That this history is of great value is unquestionable. But how far may it be trusted?

In the literary history of the "Treatise of Marianus," by Pistorius, as given by Bishop Nicolson, it is shown, concerning ancient books, that passage after passage was added by transcribers, until it became impossible to distinguish the genuine from the fraudulent. It was not unusual with early British writers to take the works of their predecessors, add to them what they desired, or else abridge them, and give their own names as the authors.

Bede's history has been subjected to the same stuffing process. The internal evidence leads to the supposition that all the passages relating to the Saxons should be expunged. It is probable that he only knew of the Saxons as a nation to be abhorred and shunned. His work purports to be a church history; but in the form now preserved, it is also a secular history. As the book stands it shows obvious anachronisms, which, to a man of his learning, must have been readily detected. He declares (chap. i.) that in his day there were only five nations, the English, Britons, Scots, Picts and Romans. 'In Book II., chapter ii., it is evident that by Britons he clearly refers to the Welsh. Having stated there were five languages, which pertained to the five nations, it is affirmed (Book V. chapter ix.) that the English are derived from many nations, six of which are named. Angles, Saxons and English are used as convertible terms. It is hardly creditable to believe that Bede could have confounded the Angles with the Saxons. Bede farther speaks with affection of the English or Angles, and mentions the Saxons with loathing, declaring that to join hands with them involved infamy and disgrace in the eyes of posterity (*Op. Hist.* xiv., 33). It also does great injustice to Bede, living so near the date, to cause him to make such gross mistakes in his history relative to the Saxon entrance into Britain. In regard to the ancient home of the Angles, he is made to contradict both Tacitus and Ptolemy. As regards the date of the Saxon advent into England he is made to contradict the

"*Notitia retriisque Imperii*," Eutropius, Prospero Tyro, who wrote, A. D. 441, and all the early writers who have written concerning the Saxons. More than this: he is even made to contradict himself; for after stating the Hengist and Horsa legend, he refers to the Saxons fighting the English, twenty years earlier. Bede is made to say that all the kings of all the Saxon-English nations were of the same blood, when it is well known that the Saxons chose their leaders by lot, and the choice lay between numberless heads of families. The pedigrees were evidently palmed off upon Bede during a more recent age. If Bede's history is read in the light it claims to be—an ecclesiastical one—it is of great value. Otherwise it is calculated to mislead.

William of Malmesbury, writing about the year 1125 affirms that the death of Bede was fatal to learning in England; for he says, "There was not so much as one Englishman left behind Bede, who emulated the glory which he had acquired by his studies, imitated his example, or pursued the path to knowledge which he had pointed out. A few, indeed, of his successors were good men, and not unlearned, but they generally spent their lives in an inglorious silence; while the far greater number sunk into sloth and ignorance, until by degrees the love of learning was quite extinguished in this island for a long time." From the death of Bede to the Norman conquest, if Asser's "*Life of Alfred*" and the "*Saxon Chronicle*" be put aside there are no literary remains worthy of notice. As to the value of the above mentioned documents particular attention should be given.

Asser's "*Life of Alfred the Great*" was first published by Archbishop Parker, in 1574, and appears in Dr. Giles' "*Six Old English Chronicles*," published in 1848. The chronicle purports to have been written by a contemporary of Alfred, John Asser, bishop of St. David's. Dr. Lingard admits that the reputation of Alfred rests upon the authority of Asser; and yet this document is not mentioned by Matthew of Westminster; Ingulphus, author of the "*Life of St. Neots*;" Simon Durrel; William of Malmesbury; Roger de Hoveden; Henry

of Huntingdon ; John Harding ; Grafton ; Tabian, and others upon whom we are to depend for authority ; and the only mention is made by Florence of Worcester. It seems a little singular that this life of the Saxon monarch was never copied by any monastery, and left wholly to depend on a single manuscript. It has even been questioned whether or not there ever was such a bishop of St. David's. The "Saxon Chronicle" gives his death at 910 ; but Roger of Wendover and Florence of Worcester give it at 883 ; which is in conflict with the chronicle itself, for it declares that he became acquainted with Alfred in 885. The date of his death given in 910, must certainly be an error, for Werslon became bishop in 905, and the see then had been vacant for seven years, and Sigelmous became bishop in 883. The chronicle itself bears internal evidence of being a forgery. Instances may be cited in the references to the "Life of St. Neots" who was not translated until nearly a century after Asser's death ; the history goes down to the forty-fifth year of Alfred, and there is not a similar instance to be found at so early a period of any man's life being written whilst yet living.

It is deserving of notice that there is a singular coincidence between the chronicles and that of Florence of Worcester, the latter of which is regarded with strong suspicion even by those who seek to maintain the authenticity of Asser. In the translation ⁵given by Forester, it is positively declared that Florence's Chronicle" is formulated on that compiled by Marianus Scotus. In a foot-note Forester says, "Florence copied Asser so literally that he has twice adopted expressions employed by the former." Scotus entered the Irish monastery of St. Martin at Cologne, about the year 1056, and died a recluse at Mentz about 1083. It is probable that every monastery kept a chronicle. Ordericus Vitalis saw that of Worcester about the year 1120, and calls it the work of John of Worcester, formulated upon a chronicle of Marianus Scotus. This chronicle is not found at Worcester, but a century later turned up at Bury, St. Edmunds, where it was continued by John de Taxted.

⁵ See Bohn's Antiquarian Library. Florence of Worcester, Preface.

In this occurs whole passages from Asser, with all the circumstances that both proceeded from the same pen. It is also singular that as Asser is unrecognized by succeeding writers save Florence of Worcester, so also none of the contemporaries of the latter make use of any of his facts. The great authority of that age, William of Malmesbury, utterly ignores him. Every evidence points to the inevitable conclusion that the same pen which wrote the chronicle of Alfred, also wrote that of Florence of Worcester.

It is probable that Alfred did encourage learning; but to what extent must ever remain a problem. The Saxons had no characters of their own, but borrowed from the Latin; for their only known author, Ethelward, wrote in the Latin tongue. It is probable that Marianus Scotus caught the stories and legends he found floating among the monks, and reduced them to a system. How far these are to be trusted must remain a matter for conjecture. Living so near the period of Alfred, some reliance may be placed in the chronicle.

There are seven MSS. of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" in existence. One of these is preserved in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, which ends with the year 1070. It is written in one hand down to the year 891. It contains many interpolations. The British Museum contains four copies. One terminates with the year 977, and is written in one hand. It is said to have belonged formerly to the monastery of St. Augustine's, Canterbury. The second ends with the year 1066, and is written in one hand to 890, when the orthography begins to vary. It contains many additions not found in the other MSS. The third terminates abruptly with the year 1080. It is mostly written in a plain and beautiful hand. Many defective parts are apparent from A. D. 261 to 693. The fourth and last of the British Museum MSS. ends imperfectly at 1058. On account of its monastic interpolations it is generally attributed to a monk of Christ's Church, Canterbury, being written in both Latin and Saxon. A MS. ending A. D. 1154, is preserved in the Bodleian library at Oxford, written in the year 1122. From 1132 to the end the language and orthography

became gradually Normanized. The Seventh, or Dublin MS., although not ancient, yet appears to have been taken from an older one, now lost. It ends with the year 1001. From dates by Lombard himself, it was begun by him in 1563 and finished the following year. This MS. was used by Archbishop Usher, and came into possession of Dublin library with others belonging to the Archbishop, according to his original intention.

There can be no question but that the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" is a compilation. Part of it is copied from Bede, and other parts from various sources. If it had been the continuous work of each age, it would display the improvements and gradations or corruptions of the Saxon tongue. But it presents an unbroken change, for throughout the language is the same, both in regard to its vocabulary and its inflections. After the middle of the eleventh century the copies differ considerably, when independent entries are made. But down to this period the identity of composition and similarity of matter are too apparent to allow any doubt that the copies were not made until this period, and that the record had been made up several years before the distribution of the transcriptions had been made. It is a singular fact that at about the time the chronicle was made up Marianus Scotus took his departure from England. Florence of Worcester, under the date 1028⁶ says, "The same year was born Marianus, of Ireland, the celebrated Scot, by whose study and pains, this excellent chronicle was compiled from various books." Under the year 1056 he writes: "Marianus, becoming a pilgrim for the sake of his heavenly country, went to Cologne and took the habit of a monk in the monastery of St. Martin, belonging to the Scots." Marianus was the most scholarly man in England of his time, understanding both Latin and Saxon well, being also familiar with the traditions of the country. It is probable he found much history of the nation written in Latin, which he recast, and then produced it in Saxon.

As the forged annals of Asser are connected with St. Neots, and Peterborough, so famous during that period for literary

⁶ See *Bohn's edition*. p. 136.

forgeries, is near the monastery, the compilation or forgery of the "Anglo-Saxon chronicle" may be assigned to its region and one or more of its monks. There is no original MS. in existence, and what copies remain are not found in their proper places, but collected by Archbishop Parker and others, from very suspicious sources, and later by Cotton, long after the Reformation, when the trade in Saxon MS. was in a flourishing condition.

The chronicle of Ethelward was written about the year 1090. It is a very brief work, and ends abruptly with the year 959. It professes to give a summary of human affairs from the creation. It is simply a dry abstract, written in a few pages of affected, and in some places of almost unintelligible Latin. It forms the first number of Dr. Giles' "Six Old English Chronicles."

The paucity of documents, genuine or forged, from the Roman withdrawal to the Norman conquest is a sad commentary on the state of learning during that period and also on the influence for good of both the Saxon and the Dane. It would appear that the learning and energy displayed by The Venerable Bede would have given an impetus to letters. But there was the impinging of races with diverse characteristics, which commingling did not develop either into moral or intellectual attainment. Apparently the intermixture of blood, after the wars were over, destroyed that equipoise which is necessary to a healthy advancement. The Norman conquest not only gave a fresh supply of blood, but aroused the motives and restored that equilibrium which had been uppermost and made itself felt during the succeeding ages.

The real history of the Saxon period may never be known. It is impossible to separate the pure grain from the chaff. Criticism may point out errors and unreliable statements, but to reconstruct what is left is a performance which has not yet been accomplished. Even if it be estimated that all the writings are authentic and have been preserved with zealous care, the history still must be unsatisfactory and disappointing.



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